

# Defining the Wildland-Urban Interface: How Local Government Becomes a Partner at the Table in Community Wildfire Planning

Stephanie Grayzeck, Kristen C. Nelson, Rachel F. Brummel  
*University of Minnesota*  
Pamela J. Jakes and Dan R. Williams  
*USDA Forest Service*



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## Changing wildfire policy

Policy shift from mainly fire suppression to a more complex agenda of suppression, preparedness, mitigation, and community assistance



Photo by Stephanie Grayzeck and Rachel Brummel



## Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003

- Promotes collaboration around wildfire management
- Expedited fuels reduction projects
- Encourages preparedness through Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs)

*How have communities in the East responded to this most recent wildfire policy?*

## Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs)

Require collaboration between 3 entities:

Local government



Local fire department



State forestry agency



Plans must:

- Identify and prioritize areas for fuels reduction
- Provide recommendations to reduce structural ignitability

## CWPPs and the WUI

“The wildland-urban interface is the area where houses meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland vegetation.”

- USDA and USDI 2001



Photo from <http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/partners/vfa/wui.html>



Photo from <http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/partners/vfa/wui.html>

Defined in the Federal Register as approximately  
1 house per 40 acres.

## CWPPs and the WUI

According to HFRA, the wildland-urban interface is considered **“any area within or adjacent to an at-risk community that is identified in recommendations to the Secretary in a Community Wildfire Protection Plan”**

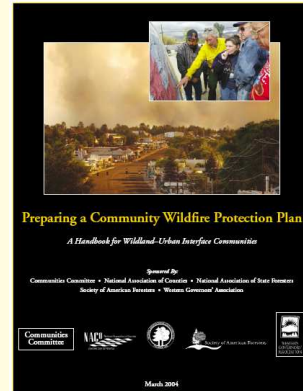


Photo from <http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/partners/vfa/wui.html>

*What does this mean  
for communities?*

# CWPPs and the WUI

Communities have the opportunity to establish a locally appropriate definition and boundary for the WUI!



## Why Look at the WUI?

- Evaluation of policy incentive
- Community-established WUI boundary can help meet local needs
- WUI boundary can include public land; allow for communities to influence action on public land (expedited fuels reduction)
- WUI boundary is where projects will happen; funding



Photos by Stephanie Grayzeck and Rachel Brummel



## COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLANS

### Enhancing Collaboration & Building Community Capacity

- What's the outcome of federally-mandated collaboration?
- How do context and process influence collaborative outcomes in wildfire planning?
- How does the CWPP process impact social capacity?

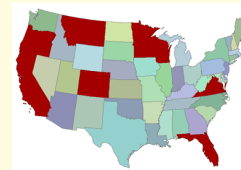
#### Principal Investigators:

- Pamela Jakes, *USFS North Central Research Station*
- Dan Williams, *USFS Rocky Mountain Research Station*



#### Partner Institutions and Investigators:

- Kristen C. Nelson, *University of Minnesota*
- Vicky Sturtevant, *Southern Oregon University*
- Tony Cheng, *Colorado State University*
- Sam Burns, *Fort Lewis College*



## Research Questions

*How have communities in the East responded to HFRA and used the WUI concept in CWPPs?*



Photo by: Stephanie Grayzeck March 2007, Florida



Photo by: Rachel Brummel, Oct 2006 Virginia



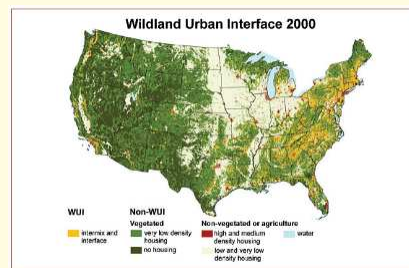
Photo by: Rachel Brummel, Oct 2006 Virginia

## Research Questions

- *How is the WUI concept used in Eastern CWPPs?*
- *What factors influence the WUI definition and designation?*
- *Do communities redefine the terms and boundaries of the WUI to meet local needs?*

## Methods: Why Focus on the East?

- Greatest extent of the WUI is in the Eastern U.S.
- Wildfire is often viewed as a “western problem”
- Fire is important in the East, particularly in the southeast and the northern Great Lakes states



## Mixed Method Approach

- Document review of Eastern CWPPs within Regions 8 and 9 of the U.S. Forest Service
- Qualitative analysis of four Eastern case studies



Photos by Stephanie Grayzeck and Rachel Brummel

### **Why?**

Broad look at how WUI concept is used in Eastern CWPPs complemented with in-depth experiences of the case studies

## Methods: Document Review

- Initial Google internet search, followed by phone/email contact with state forestry officials
- Plans had to include 3 entities under HFRA, completed after 2004
- Study variables:
  - Participants in the plan
  - Identification of the WUI
  - Scale of the plan



Photos by Stephanie Grayzeck

# Methods: Case Study Analysis

Four Eastern U.S. case studies from larger JFS project:

Lake County, Minnesota



Taylor, Florida



Barnes and Drummond,  
Wisconsin



High Knob Owner's Association  
in Front Royal, Virginia



Photos by Stephanie Grayzeck and Rachel Brummel

## Findings and Discussion

- Many types of wildfire plans in East
- WUI was not addressed in all CWPPs
- Factors for deciding the WUI:
  - case study examples
- The importance of scale
- Template influence
- Participant influence



Photo by Rachel Brummel

## What is a CWPP?

- Ambiguity regarding what a CWPP is
- Difficult to track down
- Many plans done before HFRA, with parallel goals; not influenced by the policy
- Wildfire hazard assessments not fully developed CWPPs
- Some CWPPs served as dual plans (Firewise, Natural Hazards/FEMA)

## Document Review: Initial Results



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29 plans in 10 states

### Four scales of planning:

- county (5)
- multiple township (2)
- city/township (13)
- subdivision (9)

### Four templates emerged

- Not tied to one scale
- Some used in different states

## Using the WUI Concept



Photo by Rachel Brummel

- Over half (15/29) of reviewed CWPPs used the WUI concept
- 14/29 plans did NOT use the WUI concept *in the plan*

## Using the WUI Concept

Of those 12 plans that used the WUI concept, there was a gradient of precision:

- Identifying specific areas
  - More general
  - GIS process
- Identifying the entire planning area
- Subdividing planning area
- WUI = near federal land



## Important Factors for the WUI: Case Study Examples

Theme	Code
<i>Values</i>	general "values", population centers, structures, timber
<i>Hazards</i>	general "hazards", fuel loads, fire occurrence/incidence, population (human caused fires), lack of planning
<i>Infrastructure</i>	fire department boundaries, public land boundaries, response time, access/egress
<i>Other Criteria</i>	what needed work, landscape level planning, presence of public land blocks, local concerns
<i>Policy considerations</i>	ability to redefine the WUI, HFRA definition, population density (1 house per 40 acres), federal definition
<i>Tools</i>	condition classes, timber typing, local knowledge, risk assessment tool, fire incidence maps, Madison WUI data, GIS, census data, aerial photographs
<i>Difficulties</i>	confusion/conflict on WUI definition and boundaries, changes to the lines, more information needed

## Important Factors for the WUI: Case Study Examples

- Minnesota: presence of fuels, structures, VFD boundaries
- Wisconsin: presence of fuels, structures, policy considerations
- Florida: public land boundaries



Photos by Stephanie Grayzeck and Rachel Brummel

## The Importance of Scale

Scale was an influence on whether the WUI concept was used:

- All large scale plans included mention of the WUI
- Variation at the city/township level
  - Larger cities used WUI concept
  - Small townships generally did not
- None of the subdivision-level plans used the concept of the WUI

## The Importance of Scale

County level

*“We wanted to cover most of the county with some sort of WUI...wherever we thought that there might be an area that some work needed to be done, we wanted that to be included within a Wildland urban interface area...So if you’re just doing something in a 3 or 4 mile radius around a community, you know, that may not be everything that’s needed to be done. So that’s more of the bigger picture, on more of a landscape level.”* (Minnesota, FS Fire Planner)

# The Importance of Scale

Subdivision level

*"I'm not, I probably didn't use [the WUI]...Like I say, I go in and I sit down and talk with these communities as if we're sitting around your table and talking."* (Virginia, DOF Mitigation Specialist)



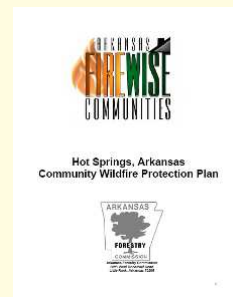
Photos by Stephanie Grayzeck

# Template Influence

Southeast Template

Virginia, Florida, Kentucky, and Arkansas

- Differences in interpretation of the WUI
  - Identifiers (KY, AR)
  - Specific area by acres (FL)
- No WUI (VA)



# Template Influence

Texas and Ohio/Pennsylvania

- Texas template (subdivision level): no WUI
- Ohio/Pennsylvania template gives definition of WUI, then states that “conditions in many parts of the property encompassed in their respective fire district qualify under this definition.”
  - No specific areas identified

# Template Influence

Minnesota County

First plan (Cook County) set a precedent to subdivide county into WUI areas based on VFD boundaries, modified by other factors:

*They are basically broken down by service area. This would be our service area. Ely fire... It's a split, a combination of service area and hazard area.”* (Minnesota local fire chief)



Lake County, MN CWPP

## Participant Influence

Participants also influence whether or not the WUI concept is used

- CWPPs are required to have three entities:

Local government



Local fire department



State forestry agency



- Additional partners include Federal agencies and third party planning commission/council

## Participant Influence:

Federal Consultation

Barnes and Drummond, WI:

**Plans that included federal actors were more likely to use the WUI concept in CWPPs.**

*"In comes [US Forest Service individual], and [he] starts talking about redefining the wildland urban interface, and that the communities within this process have the ability to redefine the wildland-urban interface, and kept focusing on the idea that okay, one home per 40 acres."*  
(Wisconsin facilitator/planner)

## Participant Influence

Local government

Local government had political influence on the WUI...



Lake County, MN website

*"[The county commissioner] also wanted [the wildland urban interface] big because he's, you know, he's thinking problem assessments, problems and solutions, and so you know for fire that's a lot of talk, fire starts burning and its burning fast and its going over a lot of area quite quickly. Umm, and then for the fire departments to be able to, be able to use their money that they can get in a whole area. That's why they thought bigger."*

(Minnesota FS Partnership Coordinator)

## Participant Influence

Local fire department

...and local fire departments influence the WUI with local knowledge

*"[The WUI boundaries] vary quite a bit. That was, we went back and forth, basically drawing lines on the map and that's where the chiefs came in very important, drawing those lines because they know what's out there exactly, and they know what's what are the values at risk."*

(Minnesota FS Fire Management Officer)

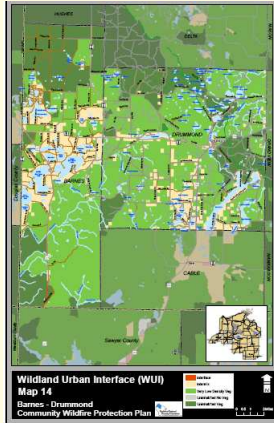




# Participant Influence

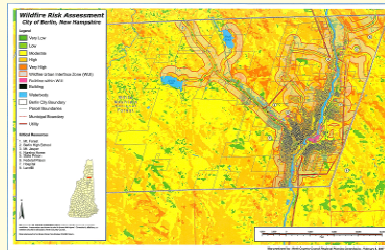
Third party planner

Barnes and Drummond  
CWPP



- Planning entity can add a technological component
- Experience with GIS
- Barnes and Drummond, WI and Berlin, NH

Berlin, NH  
Wildfire Mitigation Plan



## Conclusions

- The WUI concept is not used in all CWPPs, especially at smaller scales
- Fuels and structures were the most common factors considered for identifying the WUI, but this was complemented by other factors more specific to the community
- Scale, template and participants can influence how the WUI concept is used
- The presence of local government and fire departments can influence the WUI boundaries

## Policy and Management Implications

- A “best scale” did not emerge
- Managers, communities, and CWPP participants should consider:
  - What scale they plan to work at
  - What template they plan to use
  - What goals they want the plan to accomplish
  - Whether identifying the WUI will help achieve the local goals of the community
- Identifying the WUI in CWPPs may be a more useful policy incentive where federal land is dominant

## Acknowledgements

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Thank You

